

## ANALYSIS

*Reckless Eyeballing* (1986)



Ishmael Reed

(1938- )

## INTRODUCTION

“The fiction of Ishmael Reed doesn’t conform to whatever preconceptions one might have about the novels of black writers, or even about American novels in general. His work just doesn’t fit into convenient categories. Black critics, politicians, and the middle class are put under the knife right along with Christianity, Richard Nixon, and American history. Drawing upon techniques from such unlikely sources as vaudeville, expressionism, the narrative methods of cartoons, and the movies of Hollywood, Reed has fashioned unique fictional forms.

He has satirized American culture on a great variety of subjects from the ‘pop’. Black critics, politicians, and the middle class are put under the knife right along with Christianity, Richard Nixon, and American history. Drawing upon techniques from such unlikely sources as vaudeville, expressionism, the narrative methods of cartoons, and the movies of Hollywood, Reed has fashioned unique fictional forms. He has satirized American culture on a great variety of subjects from the ‘pop’ clergy of the 1960s to the Wild West. Perhaps, as an early critic claimed, he is a ‘revolutionary’; yes, but revolutionary in a way that few people were willing to admit a black writer could be. Reed has been planting bombs in our imaginations, disrupting our sense of what a novel should be as well as our belief about what America is....

In addition to his earlier novels, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967) and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), Reed published...another novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and a collection of poems, *Conjure* (1972), which were both nominated for National Book Awards. He had also been working on a collection of his own essays. Reed lives in Berkeley, California.”

John O’Brien

Interview of Ishmael Reed

*The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*

### REED ON LITERARY POLITICS

“We still have problems from black and white ideologists. On the white side there is what I would call ‘The Irving Howe School of Critics on Black Writing.’ Morris Dickstein and people like that are in this school. It’s very interesting that the Jewish tradition in American writing begins in 1900 and the black tradition begins in about the middle of the eighteenth century. We’ve been here longer than they have. But they become the experts on our literature and culture for some reason which I haven’t yet been able to figure out. You can always get the tip-off that they are trying to use black literature to make some kind of thesis when they begin their surveys with Richard Wright. They all begin with Richard Wright. That’s like beginning a survey of white American literature with Norman Mailer instead of with Cooper, Brown, or Hawthorne.... They use black literature to make a political statement. These people are socialists. And blacks do the same thing.... The white liberal school of critics is receding because you have better critics replacing them.”

Ishmael Reed  
John O’Brien Interview (1972) 136-38

### POLITICALLY CORRECT ANALYSIS

[The following critic, Professor Frederick R. Karl, had 5 reasons to be defensive in his analysis of this Politically Incorrect novel by a rebellious black male: Karl was (1) a Jewish New Yorker; (2) a strong Feminist; (3) had a wife and 3 daughters; (4) spent his career teaching at New York University; and (5) belongs to the “white liberal school” that Reed calls socialists, though Karl disdains some of the other Jewish critics in that school including Irving Howe]:

“Ishmael Reed, the literary gunslinger of the African-American world... Once again, as in his previous work, Reed’s aim in *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986) is to upset both expectations and point of view. In this brief novel, he takes on several of the current ideological struggles and definitely presents views which are not politically correct; views which, in fact, are aimed at particular groups: women, black women in particular, blacks in general, Jews, the entire arts establishment...

Ian Ball, a black playwright, is trying to find his way back from oblivion in a minefield of feminist critics who consider him a male chauvinist pig for his first play, *Suzanna*. His new play, *Reckless Eyeballing*, is supposed to redeem him in the eyes of his producer Becky French and black playwright Tremonisha Smarts; but the new play also gets him into deep trouble with other black males in and around the stage, who consider Ball a sellout to both women and to the Jews.

The situation, which runs on hyper for most of the time, allows Reed some of his usual satirical commentary. It gives him a forum for black attacks on Jews and women, even while Ball protests against such attacks; and it permits him to straddle many issues—using Ball as a voice of sanity at the same time offering many arguments against sanity. Interwoven into the situation are several subplots: the murder of a Jewish producer Jim Minsk, set up and murdered by white Southerners in their revenge for Leo Frank, the Jew executed for the death of a Christian girl sixty years ago and then more recently pardoned; the play being planned by Becky French, based on Eva Braun, in which Nazi women are perceived as innocents all victimized by their men; the tale of Randy Shank, once highly placed, now a doorman raging against Jews and women, a man who attacks black women and snips off a piece of their hair; and on into tales which reveal every cultural, ethnic, and racial divide the country has experienced in the last two or more decades.

Although the perspective is clearly black-oriented, Ian Ball is himself a moderator between sides, attempting to find some middle ground between the attacks and the ‘truth’ as blacks see it. The attacks clearly win the day and make Ball’s neutrality suspect. While the views toward Jews seem balanced between attack and defense, the views toward women are bent out of shape, so that so-called radical feminists appear to be running the theatre business and, by implication, the business of the country. The

attack on women is relentless, black and white, both particularized and those unknown women massed in the wings prepared to assault men, but especially black men.

The imbalance (one avoids 'paranoia' as a label) subverts the satire on gender relationships, on blacks and Jews, on everything associated with Jesse Jackson's 'rainbow coalition.' Reed is not having any part of the coalition; his is a divided, split, screaming country. But his own hobbyhorse, to ride roughshod over women who 'dare,' sucks the life out of the novel, and, in some ironic way, places him in the company of entire generations of white writers themselves unable to deal with women who insist on their own priorities. One need only think of Roth, Bellow, Mailer, and several others: black and white meet on this point that the real threat to America comes from vampirish women. It's all a hoot, in Reed's treatment. Rainbow coalitions exist as a mirage, a fantasy vision."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions: 1980-2000*  
(Xlibris 2001) 374-76

Michael Hollister (2015)